

Taking the Long View: Social Movements Across the Twentieth Century

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The Twentieth Century has seen four great transformational social movements in the United States: the movements of women, African-Americans, labor, and environmentalists. Taking the long view across the century, activists can get a better sense of what has been accomplished and a perspective offering a foundation for hope for the future. We have not only some excellent books providing an overview of these movements, but also several remarkable video documentaries which bring to life the valiant activists, many unknown and others now forgotten, who dared and sacrificed to bring about a more inclusive democracy, social justice, and a healthy world to live in.

The book which had the greatest impact on my thinking about social movements is Eleanor Flexner's *Century of Struggle: The Woman's Rights Movement in the United States* (1959; Harvard Univ. Press, 1996). I first read this book around 1970, after three productive yet frustrating years of community organizing in the central Appalachian coalfields, and being urged by my female colleagues to learn something about the roots of the emerging women's liberation movement. Flexner dramatically altered my time perspective on social movements and social change. I remember thinking: “Oh, now I get it. It's 100 years, not three to five years.”

Flexner looks back from winning the vote for women with the 19th Amendment in 1920 to the hundred years of sustained agitation that preceded it, and especially at the fifty-year continuous organizational effort for woman suffrage from 1869 to 1920. Flexner is not only attuned to the imperative of organization, but shows an unusual sensitivity to issues of class and race, including sections on working-class and African-American women. The two-hour video documentary “One Woman, One Vote” draws on Flexner's outline as well as contemporary scholarship.

During the past decade we've been blessed by an abundance of magnificent memoirs, biographies, and histories of that segment of the African-American freedom struggle we call the Civil Rights Movement. Considering all the possibilities, I believe that Juan Williams, *Eyes on the Prize: America's Civil Rights Years, 1954-1965* (Penguin Books, 1987) is the best and most accessible starting point to grasp the range of civil rights movement campaigns and personalities. Williams highlights the grassroots leaders, women as well as men, and shows their connections to networks and organizations, including NAACP chapters, black churches, and black colleges. The six videos in the first “Eyes on the Prize” series roughly parallel the chapters in the book, and provide an incomparable vivid documentation of visual images and spoken words. My young students are astonished to learn that college students in their early twenties provided courageous leadership at crucial moments that revitalized the Movement, as with the Sit-Ins, Freedom Rides, and the Mississippi Summer Project. “Freedom on My Mind” is another outstanding film and video, focused on Mississippi, with a movement perspective.

Community organization as widely practiced in the United States is an offshoot of the labor

movement, via the figure of Saul Alinsky. The best overview of his work is Sanford D. Horwitt, *Let Them Call Me Rebel: Saul Alinsky – His Life and Legacy* (Alfred A. Knopf, 1989). Alinsky is the inspiration for such networks of faith-based groups as the Industrial Areas Foundation, PICO, DART, and the Gamaliel Foundation, as well as secular groups like ACORN. The video “The Democratic Promise: Saul Alinsky and His Legacy,” covers some history as well as the efforts of contemporary IAF organizations.

The labor movement shows signs of revival, and activists would do well to get acquainted with its history and potential. To understand the organization of the CIO, you have to read up on the chieftain of the United Mine Workers. Saul Alinsky wrote *John L. Lewis: An Unauthorized Biography* (1949; Vintage Books, 1970), full of entertaining stories; the more accurate and definitive work is Melvyn Dubofsky and Warren Van Tine, *John L. Lewis: A Biography* (Univ. of Illinois Press, 1968).

For the nearly forgotten figure who organized the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, and faced down two Presidents to win access to World War II defense jobs for African-Americans and desegregation of the military, see Paula F. Pfeffer, *A. Philip Randolph: Pioneer of the Civil Rights Movement* (Louisiana State Univ. Press, 1990). An excellent video, “A. Philip Randolph: For Jobs and Freedom,” highlights his role in the March on Washington Movement, which he finally carries off in 1963.

If you wonder why people from the United Auto Workers keep showing up in civil rights actions and among the new feminists in the 1960s, check out Nelson Lichtenstein, *Walter Reuther: The Most Dangerous Man in Detroit* (Univ. of Illinois Press, 1996). For a look at the Detroit sit-down strikes of the 1930s (which inspired the sit-ins of the 1960s) and the actions of the Women’s Emergency Brigade, see the video “Sit Down and Fight: Walter Reuther and the Rise of the Auto Worker Union.” A classic documentary film on radical women and labor is “Union Maids” (now available in video from New Day Films), with characters drawn from profiles in Alice and Staughton Lynd, *Rank and File* (Beacon Press, 1973).

The environmental movement also spans the century. Ecology activists can get perspective on their roots in Stephen Fox, *The American Conservation Movement: John Muir and His Legacy* (1971; Univ. of Wisconsin Press, 1986). Philip Shabecoff takes the story to the present in *A Fierce Green Fire: The American Environmental Movement* (Hill & Wang, 1993). For an alternative interpretation, which links environmentalism to the Progressive era public health movement and the Sixties’ New Left, see Robert Gottlieb, *Forcing the Spring: The Transformation of the American Environmental Movement* (Island Press, 1993).

We can all find inspiration in the lessons and legacies of these four great social movements of the Twentieth Century. I like to recall the words of veteran San Francisco environmentalist Harold Gilliam, written on Earth Day 1990, “When you’ve been climbing a mountain for a long time and the summit seems to be as far away as ever, it can give you new heart for the ascent to look back and see how far you’ve come.”